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THE ANOMALOUS PLACE OF MOZART IN MUSIC

By HAROLD D. PHILLIPS

A WIDE personal intercourse with musicians of various types, together with the concensus of opinion which occasionally finds expression in current musical literature, has gone far to convince me that, with the single exception of Bach, Mozart is beyond all others essentially the musician's musician. I say advisedly the musician's musician because I believe that, if the taste of the general public were consulted, there would be found no composer of the first magnitude so little in sympathy with its cravings and ideals.

The discrepancy of opinion, indeed, between the cultivated musician and the mere music-lover is one of peculiar psychological interest, for, on the surface, the appeal of Mozart's music would certainly seem to be to the layman rather than to the expert. He has, for instance, to a greater extent than any other composer of the first rank a very un-Teutonic "light touch," and in pure melodic invention it is generally conceded that Schubert is his only rival. Further, he is never guilty of the unpardonable sin of thrusting subjects for reflection on ears seeking the satisfaction of pure sound only. In a word, Mozart is wholly untrammelled by any of the factors which have delayed the world-wide recognition of such genius as that of Bach, Brahms, César Franck and the later Beethoven.

On the other hand, it must be admitted that the actual volume of his tone is usually very meagre and that in all his music there is hardly a suggestion of strong elemental passion or even of atmosphere in the ordinary sense of the term.

What is there, then, in the essence of his music, which, despite these limitations, surely as obvious to the trained musician as to the amateur, places him on such a pedestal in the minds of the most æsthetically sensitive and eclectic? Well, to clear the way, let it be conceded that the typical Mozart composition is as much of a bore to the connoisseur as to the average concert-goer. His ordinary output, indeed, is perhaps of less account than that of any composer of the first order with the exception

of Handel, as is shown, for instance, by the fact that, out of forty-nine symphonies, three or at most five still survive. Compare this with Beethoven's nine—all of which in a greater or lesser degree still enjoy good health. The well-informed musician, however, knows the conditions under which the composer worked—that the harmonic, as distinct from the polyphonic, school was still in its infancy, and that all the composers of the period were to a great extent experimenting not only in harmonic progressions and form, but also in colour and instrumental technique. He also realizes that the formal and artificial traditions of Europe about the middle of the eighteenth century would have regarded the expression of strong feeling or individuality as something indecorous or even indecent. Consequently, enlightened musicians dismiss the numerous insignificant works of Mozart under the headings of technical studies, experiments and pot-boilers and place the composer among the three supreme musical geniuses of all time on the strength of his masterpieces alone.

In this connection, it is well to realize that a creative artist should be held responsible to posterity for the positive value of what he has bequeathed—not for the negative qualities of numbers which the public is at perfect liberty to discard at discretion.¹ Now, the true appreciation of the measure of any composer's genius must be gauged to a great extent by his influence on the history and evolution of his art, and, in this respect, I have often been amazed at the confusion existing even in the minds of musicians as to the relative importance of the pioneer work done by Haydn and Mozart respectively. Students are still taught in a general way to think of Haydn as the prime originator, Mozart merely as the developer and Beethoven the perfecter of that great school of instrumental music which superseded the polyphonic era and found expression in the Piano Sonata, String Quartet, Concerto and Symphony.

Now, to do Haydn justice, he does seem actually to have been the creator of the modern String Quartet and also to have perfected, in miniature at any rate, the instrumental forms of his immediate predecessors before Mozart appeared on the horizon.

It was the latter, however, who, in Haydn's lifetime and eighteen years his junior, elevated the symphony and quartet from insignificance and obscurity to the very highest of musical

¹It will interest the author and his readers that the following saying is attributed in Central Europe to Mozart: "Wer mich nach meinen schlechten Sachen beurteilt, ist ein Lump" (whoever judges me by my poor stuff, is a rascal). Whether this dictum be apocryphal or not, I do not know.—*Ed.*

forms and who was undeniably the first masterhand in laying the foundation of those general principles of orchestral scoring that have served as a model to most of his successors. It was Mozart also who created the modern concerto, and who raised traditional Italian opera to a height hitherto unconceived and never since attained, and simultaneously paved the way for that German School of Opera afterwards wholly nationalized by Weber.

These are the things which the expert knows and of which the amateur is naturally ignorant, and they, to a great extent, account for the disparity in the viewpoint of both sides. The question of evolutionary knowledge on the one hand, and corresponding ignorance on the other, while of immeasurable importance in estimating the genius of, say, a contributor to scientific research, cannot, however, in the nature of things, be by itself an equally determining factor in the case of artistic creation. Here, intuition, not merely knowledge, has to be reckoned with both on the part of the unsophisticated music-lover and on that of the cultivated musician, and it is in the deeper and more subtle intuition of the latter rather than in evolutionary statistics that, I think, is to be found the ultimate solution of the question under discussion.

To the higher type of musician belongs that peculiar fineness of organization and sensibility essential for the full realization of Mozart's genius, and that is why for the most part we see reflected in the greatest of his successors a profound esteem and love amounting almost to adoration in speaking of his music. For one thing, it is only to this finer type of musician that the appeal of the supreme refinement of Mozart's music is manifest, for this refinement is of a very subtle order and is revealed not so much in the nature of the composer's actual conceptions as in the almost ethereal delicacy of their expression.

This particular secret of the composer's genius can be discerned sometimes even in his pianoforte works, but far more in his string quartets and chamber music generally. Mere refinement of expression, however transcendent, cannot alone account for the peculiar fascination that the best music of Mozart has for the elect; and I think we come nearer to an understanding of the problem when we realize the existence under the surface of a very subtle vein of poetry and idealism altogether out of the range of the average hearer.

Take, for instance, "Don Giovanni"; here indeed is an exception to the biblical saying that no man can touch pitch without being defiled. Just imagine what any of the realistic composers

of to-day would have done with a story generally frivolous and, except in the finale, suggesting nothing either of the dramatic or even the imaginative! Mozart, however, in a way all his own and never even approximated by any other composer, has somehow refined and idealized not only every character but every incident in the play, and this without any sacrifice of the main essence and purport of the librettist's conception.

Think, by comparison, of Beethoven, who wrote only one opera through inability to discover another libretto of sufficient nobility! From altogether another angle, take, for example, "*Lucia di Lammermoor*." Here (exactly the antithesis of "*Don Giovanni*") is the instance of an opera founded on one of the most sublime tragedies in fiction wantonly degraded into a triviality to fall in line with the limited and shallow gifts of Donizetti, or, to quote a familiar phrase, "used as a peg to hang pretty tunes on."

There is another characteristic, once again only discernible to the few, but to them no infrequent element in Mozart's best music and occasionally making its appearance even in his more commonplace work, and that is a peculiarly subconscious element of pathos. This has nothing in common with the pathos of a great struggling soul like that of Beethoven or with the more feminine repinings of Chopin or Tschaikowsky. Rather is it the plain-tiveness of a frail, highly strung child who through hypersensitiveness of organization is subtly aware of lurking potential tragedy even in the ordinary incidents of every-day life, but who, nevertheless, generally enjoys existence and is wholly free from morbidity.

Paradoxical as it seems, even the obscure depths of the pathos of Brahms, César Franck or the later Beethoven are more intelligible to most musicians, for this obscurity is a natural result of the difficulty of expressing, in ordinary terms, thoughts and feelings so remote from the consciousness of the average individual. The undeniable something, however, that is so baffling in the character of Mozart's pathos, is that, except in his "*Requiem*," he never appears to have any conscious realization of the soul struggles or tragedies of life, and his particular expression of pathos gives the impression of something projected accidentally, so to speak, from his subconscious mind.

Enough has now been said as to the more hidden and inward qualities of Mozart's music, perhaps one of the most difficult subjects conceivable to treat of in a lucid and convincing manner. There remain, however, to be noted one or two reasons more definite in their nature, for the disparity of opinion between

the two types of critic so often alluded to as to the true measure of Mozart's genius. One is the more than scholarly perfection shown in his part-writing, construction, and in the detail of composition generally, which it would be manifestly unfair to expect the ordinary music-lover to grasp. Another is the absolutely intuitive dramatic genius revealed in his greater operas, but which, owing in a great measure to the character of the librettos, passes unnoticed as a rule by the typical patron of the opera and, indeed, can be fully appreciated only by musicians of unusual perspicacity.

Having reviewed as much in detail as space will reasonably permit what seem to be the underlying causes for the divergence of opinion as to Mozart's place in the musical world of to-day, the writer now ventures to suggest one flaw in the composer's make-up as a whole, which he thinks will be generally admitted alike by the amateur and the expert. This is the over-accentuation of the purely formal element—a thing which cannot be wholly extenuated either by the artificiality of the age in which the composer lived or by the transitional condition of music generally at that period.

Even Haydn was less obtrusive and obvious in his formality, while Beethoven about the time of Mozart's death was already (at any rate in his piano sonatas) beginning to create isolated movements wholly without a trace of those formal passages which mar even the greatest of Mozart's instrumental compositions. Take even the latter's most inspired creations, such as the first movement of the G minor Symphony or the Adagio of the String Quintet in the same key—even here are to be found passages which do not appear to be an integral part of the composer's conception, but are irritatingly reminiscent of similar passages in others of his compositions.

In comparing these movements with so early a work, for instance, as the Adagio of Beethoven's E \flat Sonata (Opus 7), where every measure seems to be part and parcel of the original conception, one cannot but recall the verdict of a once famous critic to the effect that, whereas Mozart moulded the thought to fit the form, Beethoven moulded the form to fit the thought.